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What Does Black Protest Appear to Be?

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ABSTRACT This article interrogates the visual and political logics that make black protest intelligible within modern regimes of political appearance. Focusing on the Black Lives Matter movement and the 2020 Minneapolis uprising, the essay draws on Afropessimist and psychoanalytic theory to examine how the riot unsettles the frameworks that render Blackness legible only through vulnerability, loss, or redemptive spectacle. Against interpretations that recuperate black protest as democratic renewal or moral claim, it theorizes black protest as a site of rupture rather than representation, and as an encounter that exposes the limits of visibility politics and gestures toward a mode of relation unbound from recognition, redemption, or the demand to appear.

KEYWORDS Afropessimism, Black Lives Matter, politics, psychoanalysis, social movements

I: On the Space of Appearance

I begin with a provocation that it is necessary to unsettle the assumptive invocation of black protest as the emergence of the possibility for transformative recognition, the chance for an otherwise "impossible relation" between black and white, and its presumptive function as an opportunity for democratic renewal–liberal, abolitionist, or otherwise. Moreover, I propose that the space black protest opens is (and has been) crucially related to a strategy of making visible the racist geographies and social arrangements of surveillance, containment, and killing, and the value of black people, which we might read as a critique of who and what appears in social and political life. That is, an indictment of who is seen to matter and a contestation of the production of that difference. Further, insofar as the

production of difference as a matter of appearance and visibility denotes a racist political-aesthetic regime, critical attention is due to not only what black protest does with the visibility it achieves, which many scholars have considered, but more fundamentally, how a racist regime of appearance structures, even as it is intervened upon by, black protest.[1]

Here, we can take the recent Black Lives Matter movement as a critical contemporary site to elucidate the stakes of the interrogation. The protest begins with the circulation of a cell phone video of a cop gunning a black person down. This critical countersurveillance of routinely disappeared recursions of state violence forms a digital co-presence through the appearance of the dead and dying black body.[2] The insistence on witnessing and making visible these racist geographies and social arrangements drives black people (and their allies) to assemble at sites of connection: restaurants, bridges, roads, and public spaces. Embodied black protest emerges as a critique of appearance as a matter of life and death. It questions who makes up the public ("Whose streets?"), who can appear and be seen as human within it ("Hands up! Don't shoot!"), and the value of those lives and bodies that are disappeared and destroyed by the reigning order of appearance ("Black Lives Matter!"). Consequently, I ask, what does black protest appear to be?

Black Lives Matter's creation of new publics ostensibly presented new possibilities for relation, new resources to imagine an organization of life and matter, sociality and politics, and the temporality of a present and future otherwise than now.[3] According to this popular view, the interjection and practice of witnessing opens a democratic and dialogic potential for sociality.[4] Protest, in this account, makes us visible to one another, allowing us to mutually create and enter a space of common existence and interdependence, assuming responsibility for a radically expansive (not merely inclusive) notion of the political body. In this sense, black protest appears to be a radical critique of the racist administration of visibility. By reorganizing the value that some kinds of racial

visibility can herald, it is seen to present a transformative opportunity for blacks and nonblacks alike to renew themselves as political subjects through a seeing of the other in a different order of appearance: "When Black people get free, everybody gets free."[5]

Throughout the Black Lives Matter movement, this axiom oriented the struggle for black freedom within a broader political worldview of a universal freedom for all people. Consider the protocol of "centering blackness" that #Asians4BlackLives, a solidarity group in the San Francisco Bay Area that emerged in 2014 in response to organizers in Ferguson's call to action, posted online after a solidarity action blocking the entrance to an Oakland police station for the amount of time Michael Brown's slain body laid in the street:

> We understand that the path to liberation for all communities travels through the liberation of Black communities in America. When Black people have justice and liberation, we all move one big step closer to real freedom. To us, solidarity encompasses understanding that we will never be truly free till Black people are free.[6]

This axiomatic invocation emerged because of the consensus among radical activists (and among academic theorists of antiblackness) that the centrality of antiblackness in social and political life was tied to and antecedent of other vectors of violence and inequity, and that there was, a priori, an inextricable link between these struggles that subtended *any* struggle against oppression.[7] It became an ethical imperative, based on the recognition of linked oppression, to understand the primacy and urgency of black liberation. Yet, I would like to take a step back to consider the conditions that led to the emergence of this solidarity. I posit that it was the *appearance of Michael Brown's dead body*, the space of appearance literally outlined in the street, and the duration of that appearance, extended by its viral circulation, that together constituted a spatio-temporal field that reoriented bodies, claims, and relations through the coordinates of visibility, vulnerability, and recognition. In this configuration, the inextricability of struggles

was apprehended less as a structural truth than as a visceral response to the spectacle of black death—making antiblackness palpable to a broader public precisely through its lethal manifestations. This reframing helped shape the widespread adoption of solidarity with the movement.

In this sense, the grounds of solidarity were bound to the visibility of black death. This is not unique to Michael Brown. The catalysts of Black Lives Matter—those whose political subjectivity emerged in protest—were dead. Trayvon Martin, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, too many others. Their deaths preceded their political appearance as subjects; the emergence of a movement through the embodied protests of black people did not appear from a mobilized constituency making claims upon democratic ideals, but from a politicized mourning, what we might call a politics of the socially dead. We can understand the rallying cry "Black Lives Matter," then, as paradoxically both an affirmation of life and an acknowledgment that the price of political entry is death. Black political appearance is thus an engagement with a recursive scene in which blackness is rendered visible only as a figure of loss, vulnerability, and an opportunity for the redemption of others. The demand for inclusion into political subjectivity is thus predicated on a prior demand: that blackness first be rendered through its deathly figuration in the political imaginary.

However, this prior demand for and appearance of the dead black body has gone overlooked in critical engagements with this idea. Nicholas Mirzoeff, perhaps the most eloquent recent exponent of this visual-democratic frame, helps us see the contours and limits of a broader political-aesthetic imaginary. In *The Appearance of Black Lives Matter,* Mirzoeff, following Butler's reformulation of Arendt, figures the appearance of black protest in the "reversal of vulnerability" staged by protestors chanting and gesticulating "Hands up! Don't shoot!" and the redeployment of the direct-action strategy of die-ins. He writes,

> The signature gestures of the post-Ferguson movement were the new action "Hands Up, Don't Shoot" and the appropriation of the older tactic of the mass die-in. By appropriative reversal of vulnerability, these embodied performances reclaimed the right to existence, the first claim of all abolition. This vulnerable moment creates a dynamic whereby those following or watching feel actively engaged, whether online or locally. It calls to the witness and the watcher to become engaged first through bodily mimesis and then by making the watching body political.[8]

Building on the idea that these gestures provoke identification through embodied vulnerability, Mirzoeff contends that the space of appearance enables mutual recognition and relational invention:

> In that space, the black person and those in affiliation with blackness might also see each other otherwise than as predicated by the color line and invent each other in an uneven but dialogic imagination. The freedom of appearance is a practice, whereby we make ourselves visible to each other. The person designated white appears in order to listen to what the other, identifying as black, might have to say, even and especially when they are silent.[9]

In sum, Mirzoeff argues that "Black Lives Matter created a new means to "prefigure a different 'America,' a space of appearance for abolition democracy."[10] Although generative in its effort to reclaim visual space for black life, this account underestimates the disciplinary architecture of appearance and its relationship to political-juridical order, as well as the "public" as a space defined by that relationship. Such accounts collapse the distinction between witness and spectator, endowing the latter with the ethical urgency of the former. Moreover, insofar as he frames the space of appearance as an opportunity to realize a different American democratic political project, I find Mirzoeff's optimism about the political actor (black or nonblack) anachronistic to the contemporary moment of political struggle. The framework assumes a democratic public sphere that does not exist in the form he imagines. The vision of a dialogic encounter presupposes political subjects who can meaningfully participate in constructing

legal and political discourse; however, what if that participatory capacity has been fundamentally altered? The conflation of witness and spectator becomes particularly problematic when we consider how digital circulation transforms witnessing *into* spectatorship, that is, how the viral circulation of black death creates not active witnesses but passive spectators.

Mirzoeff figures BLM protestors as epistemic agents in a participatory democracy, capable of shaping political discourse. But, as Guglielmo Siniscalchi warns in "Spectatorial Democracy," this participatory model may be obsolete.[11] Drawing on Guy Debord, Siniscalchi contends that "the birth of the 'society of images' has put the [political subject] in an increasingly less active role [. . .] in controlling the legal limits of power exertion."[12] As a spectator, he writes, "the recipient has no choice but to applaud or disagree with the mise-en-scène of the legal discourse's development."[13]

Following Siniscalchi, the shift from participatory citizenship to spectatorial democracy reflects a broader transformation in which the political-juridical order is no longer constructed through democratic processes (perhaps itself already a fantasy) but increasingly shaped by transnational economic forces (here, we might consider the global social media platforms that were crucial to the proliferation of solidarity like Meta, X, and TikTok), rendering the public a mere audience to decisions made elsewhere, beyond their reach, in a mise-en-scène they observe but no longer enter. The circulation of black death, while critical to the movement's emergence, is inextricable from the profit incentive of transnational corporations. Such a link encourages us to not only consider how the space of appearance is inaugurated in protest (as the circulation of black countersurveillance), but also how the enabling conditions of that appearance may have structurally delimited the forms of political subjectivity and their agentive capacities in ways that circumscribe the dialogic potential of interracial encounter. Thus, we might say that the transition from participatory democracy to spectatorial democracy marks not simply a loss of agency, but a structural

displacement of political construction into economic circuits controlled by transnational corporations. This shift sharpens the stakes of digital "copresence" lauded by thinkers like Loretta Baldassar and Mirzoeff; the circulation of black death may produce affective communion or tactical visibility, but it also fuels a platform economy in which witnessing becomes a mode of passive legitimation and profit extraction, rather than a catalyst for political transformation.

Insofar as Mirzoeff understands assembly and appearance as making visible a political claim, the transformative potential they attribute to that revelation depends on a prior assumption about how visibility works, namely, that appearing enables one to act as an epistemic agent capable of reorienting the public toward a more just sense of relationality or interdependence. But this assumes that visibility itself retains political efficacy. If, as Siniscalchi argues, the public sphere has become a site not of participation but of spectatorship, then the space of appearance may no longer enable one to participate in the construction of political meaning–it might only allow one to assent or dissent within a scene whose terms are already established. The spectator, unlike the witness, is structurally positioned to *view* the performance of legitimacy rather than intervene in its construction. Even practices of countersurveillance, turning the gaze back onto the sovereign body, may only invert the terms of the spectacle rather than exit it. Such accounts risk reaffirming the legitimacy of the visual order by framing political possibility as a matter of recognition within its frame, when, I argue, what black protest reveals is that this order cannot be resituated; it can only be ruptured.

What if we refused the assumption that appearance, visibility, or the broader regime of image and representation hold radical potential? Not simply because blacks are excluded or dehumanized within these regimes, but because these ocular logics already overdetermine black protest as either a moral critique of, or a redemptive contribution to, the social order, its limit, and horizon.[14] To predicate the political on the capacity to appear is, analytically, to concede the terms of the

order in advance. The insistence that all bodies *can* appear, and that differently situated bodies might *see* one another anew through that appearance, forecloses a more rigorous critique of the visual regime itself. It presumes that the space of appearance remains a viable site of intervention, rather than interrogating how that space is already structured by antiblack violence and organized to metabolize black visibility into legibility, and legibility into capture.

Rather than affirming appearance as the site where bodies become visible in new relation, I argue that such a formulation relies on what Denise Ferreira da Silva has critiqued as the *transparency thesis*: the modern onto-epistemological presumption that being and meaning are effects of interiority and temporality.[15] That is, they treat the black subject's appearance as self-evident, politically legible, and universally intelligible, assuming the scene of assembly, "hands up," die-ins, or silent mourning, automatically yield recognition, relation, and democratic renewal. But this assumes too much. It presumes that blackness can appear as such, that its transformed meaning can emerge through a visual regime structured by universal reason, without interrogating the productive matrix through which modernity institutes blackness as exterior to both politics and self-determined being. Let us not make the same mistake.

Hands up, dying-in, or silent. These are the sites of protest that open a new space of appearance "otherwise than as predicated by the color line."[16] And yet, these sites where black people appear *otherwise* curiously mirror what political theorist Erin R. Pineda, in her trenchant book theorizing how the civil rights movement operates as the horizon of judgement for all civil disobedience, identifies as the "nonviolent, noncoercive, persuasive" actions that are "oriented toward common, constitutional principles that ensure [black civil disobedience] remains governed by the impulses of public reason and the norms of citizenly conduct within the constitutional democratic state."[17] What Pineda's analysis brings forward here is the disciplinary frame through which the appearance, character, and meaning of

black protest are overdetermined by a political-aesthetic regime ensuring a sense of social harmony as a prerequisite for legitimacy or persuasion.[18]

Why is it that this form of black protest—supplicant, vulnerable, still—persists in even so-called 'abolitionist' theorizations of its potential? What is it about black political appearance that invariably reduces its offering and ethical call to and through the image of the (socially) dead or dying black body? Or that limits the array of legitimate forms of appeal which might righteously call nonblacks into ethical relation, to performances of vulnerability? Disarmed, silent, playing dead. The space of appearance, then, is not neutral terrain, and "theorizing can itself perform racial power."[19] Rather, it is the scene through which blackness is rendered available to others as a figure of suffering, lack, or redemption. In this sense, such frames are not an escape from the racial regime of representation, nor its transformation, but a reiteration of its terms, one in which black protest functions less as an interruption than as a momentary intensification of the Enlightenment's political-aesthetic fantasy.

If we begin to see that the space of appearance rests on an assumption of blackness as self-evident and politically intelligible, capable of catalyzing new social bonds simply through the act of being seen, but only through a restrictive repertoire of appeal, then we must also ask what this framework cannot register. What if black protest does not always take place *within* the visual and epistemic architecture of recognition, but at times ruptures it entirely? What if its force lies not in being rendered visible, but in disorganizing the sensorial conditions of visibility itself? Here, the scene of the riot becomes instructive, not as a negation of appearance, but as an event that unsettles the grammar through which black political appearance becomes meaningful. It demands that we attend not simply to what is seen, but to how racial meaning is produced in the first place, that is, to the representational order that renders blackness available only as loss, death, or redemptive foil. The riot as a site of black protest, I argue, stages an encounter through a sensorial break from the regime of appearance.

II: Look, a Riot!

So far, the detailing of my provocation has centered on phenomenological readings of black protest that foreground visibility and recognition—readings that treat protest as a strategy of making visible, of appearing, and of entering relation through appearance. In a way, such accountings imagine the "space of appearance" as a kind of clear, cloudless day: a place of legibility, where bodies appear directly and meaning might be apprehended in full light. However, if appearance depends on conditions of exposure, we might ask: under what environmental and affective conditions does appearance occur? It may, after all, allow us to see things differently. Both Butler and Mirzoeff, in similar ways, explore the political potential of the space of appearance when bodies appear peacefully, nonviolently, silently, or vulnerably. My argument is not that the opposite is true–that the riot's disorientation, noise, and fragmentation hold some more authentic promise of appearance. Rather, I want to mark how even asking what black protest appears to be often repeats the structure of the bind: that blackness is not only bound to appear, but, we could say, bound *in order to* appear.[20] That is, black protest is made to signify within a tightly regulated aesthetic-political regime that overdetermines what appears, how, and to whom.

Think about when, where, and how the riot comes–at night, in the dark–as a sensorial encounter in which what appears to make sense is dislodged. Here, light doesn't so much illuminate as shatter: the burst of a Molotov, the sudden flare of flame licking up a wall, the strobing sirens casting everything in epileptic red and blue. Heat presses against your skin and singes your lungs with smoke that clouds your vision, chokes your breath. The police station is burning. But so are the grocery store and the pharmacy. "We burning this down. I grew up around here. Fuck that building . . . fuck it all," someone says.[21] Not just buildings, but the ordinary coordinates of belonging. The space of appearance doesn't open cleanly. A stranger's eyes catch yours for a split second through fogged goggles

and a bandana. You see yourself lit up–exposed–under the spotlight of a cop car or caught in the dizzy wash of sirens. The boundaries between watcher and watched collapse. And the sound: glass shattering, alarms wailing, bodies chanting and howling. The scream splits the air, and everything is vibrating, unsteady. Nothing holds.

This representation of the riot is not meant to stand in contradistinction to the space of appearance described above, nor to posit rioters "in action" as a more legitimate form of political presence. I do not claim that the riot is a truer or purer site of appearance. I stage it instead to mark how black protest, when it riots, summons an encounter with sensorial and symbolic disorientation. It unsettles the frameworks through which meaning coheres. The riot is not only disobedient but also destabilizing. This brings us to a question too rarely asked: what makes black protest *black*? And what kinds of moral, ethical, or political commitments are smuggled into that naming? More often than actions of civil disobedience, black riots are often positioned within scholarly and journalistic discourse as objects requiring translation, offered up with interpretive frames that instruct us how to read a riot, how to justify its appearance. From Ferguson to Minneapolis, and in the so-called global "rebirth of history," the riot has been reabsorbed into political discourse as a symptomatic response to the crisis of late capitalism.

Joshua Clover offers perhaps the most influential materialist theorization of this return. He positions the riot as the logical successor to the strike in an era of surplus populations: a formation where the riot, like the strike, emerges from structural antagonism, now outside the workplace, in relation to state violence.[22] For Clover, the riot is "both marked by and marks out race," intimately entangled with racialization and exclusion.[23] Here, blackness becomes legible insofar as it signals a structural exclusion within the capitalist order, one that can be understood through the grammar of political-economic contradiction and democratic injury. Similarly, Ricky Mouser has argued that riots can be morally justified as intermediate harms, between disobedience and revolution, when they

arise in response to racialized state violence.[24] Both thinkers, in different ways, treat the riot as politically legible, even if uncivil. As a result, black riots are reframed as democratic expressions of grievance—"deeply aggrieved citizens," realizing their antagonism to the state through protest.[25]

But such accounts risk reenacting the very move I aim to unsettle: the conversion of black rebellion into coherent political speech. Building on the skepticism toward appearance developed in the first half of this article, I propose instead that the riot is black not because of the presence of black people, although that presence is far from irrelevant; rather, it emerges from the unbearable condition of blackness as nothingness: a structural position excluded from the world, yet made to sustain its coherence.[26] In this sense, black protest *appearing* is not a gesture toward truth, but an emergence of what is unendurable in what blackness is made to bear.

Three propositions follow:

1. Blackness disturbs every stable formation of identity and difference.[27]
2. Blackness is not presence but displacement—a (mis)naming of what psychoanalysis might call *ab-sens*.[28]
3. Blackness, as an ontological impossibility, should not be conflated with the figures through which that impossibility appears.

Put differently, blackness is not an identity, a social position, or a political stance– it is the condition through which such positions are made thinkable, precisely by being excluded. If there is such a thing as a "black riot," it is not because of who riots, but because the riot materializes the antagonism that blackness names: the recursive, foundational exclusion that world-making requires. The riot stages a crisis of sense that exceeds all available representational and ethical frames. And this is why it must be translated, rendered legible, made to "mean." But the un-recuperated riot threatens something else: not simply injustice, but *unjustifiability*. It gestures toward a loss that cannot be signified–an expenditure without reserve.[29] And so, theory rushes in to stabilize the threat, to tether the riot back

to political form, to excise what cannot be incorporated. This cut, I argue, is not merely interpretive–it reinscribes the very operation of worlding, in the sense of *making* sense, that the Symbolic Order performs.[30] In this sense, blackness does "not correlate with any particular social attribute or to a mode of 'being' that any subject could properly claim."[31] We might understand the blackness of the riot as what Saidiya Hartman reads as the threat of black revolution that becomes effaced by what "black protest" appears to be.[32] The latter is interpreted as the truth of worlding, or what "Just" worlding might entail, but I am arguing that this is only a further displacement of an ontological impossibility that "black people" do not *inherently* represent (this is the contingency of political ontology in Sexton's sense), but whose representation, as it has been constructed, has been figured, as if it were given, as the truth of worlding's cost. But the riot's blackness does not impute moralism, ethics, or politics. In fact, such things arise precisely through the (re)production of blackness as such, as nothingness, the exclusion against which such things form.

Thus, it is not, in other words, my aim here to present a "better" empirical representation of the riot, nor to valorize its destructiveness by arguing its proportionality relative to antiblackness. Rather, it is my goal to conceptually disorient how the riot appears, to render it less an event to be read than a breach to be felt, a space-time that (not always, not inevitably) permits a confrontation with the *drive* that compels the cut.[33] That is, the ways we all, including black people, recursively mobilize the figure of the "black riot" to stage that cut again and again: to cast blackness as the nonincorporable remainder whose exclusion affords the proper ethical discernment of any black political tradition. Blackness is the radical negativity of the riot that does not refer to something substantive —"the black" as a being *per se*—but what, within the current order, is inimical to itself: those parts that not only cannot be recuperated but are antagonistic to such recuperation. Here, we might think of the anti-sociality of burning the world down, the way the flame exceeds proportional constraints indiscriminately.[34] In such moments, the riot's force is not measured by what it achieves or represents

but by the unreserved expenditure of its negativity—a release that, even as it may be seized upon and made visible within regimes of appearance, refuses their measure.

Conclusion

Throughout this analysis, I have argued that both the "peaceful" manifestations of black protest, such as hands-up, die-ins, and silent mourning, and the more severe sensorial disruptions of the riot remain ensnared within a visual-political regime that can only render blackness legible through death, vulnerability, or spectacular disruption. Whether appearing as supplicant or destroyer, the black protester is made to signify within coordinates that overdetermine not simply what can be seen, but what can *mean*. The space of appearance, far from offering an escape from racial violence, functions as the scene through which that violence is reproduced, even, and especially, when it appears to be overcome. This creates what we might call the appearance trap: black protest must appear to matter but can only appear as that which must be excised from mattering. The calls to "see" black humanity, to "witness" black suffering, to "recognize" black worth all reproduce the scopic regime that produces blackness as visible only in its negation. Even riots, when theorized as expressions of legitimate grievance or structural antagonism, become reabsorbed into a political discourse that transforms disruption into democratic speech.

But what if the most radical gesture is not to appear differently, but to refuse appearance altogether? Not purely in the oppositional sense, in which one might still *appear*, if only in the "negative," but in the sense of withdrawing from the regime that makes visibility a condition of political possibility? This is not a call for strategic or fugitive invisibility or tactical retreat, but rather an attention to those forms of black life that operate outside the demand to be seen, recognized, or interpreted. Consider the "Mandate for Black People" conceptualized by

organizer Mary Hooks, which circulated broadly as a call-and-response during the Black Lives Matter Movement:

> The Mandate for Black People in This Time
> Is to Avenge the Suffering of Our Ancestors;
> To Earn the Respect of Future Generations;
> And Be Willing to Be Transformed in the Service of the Work

No mention of citizenship, the state, the child, belonging, or success, but a connection to ancestors past and future. If blackness is that which must always be excised, if it is indeed outside of everything, I think Hooks's invocation offers a different account of black protest irreducible to class or nation-based claims and unsatisfactorily thought within race as a modality of class antagonism that would clarify its appearance or aims. Instead, I find a transhistorical vision of black political action as something that exists within a continuum not delineated by the pretext of solidarity, democratic renewal, or the linear notion of reproductive futurity, so commonly framed as the impetus of black politics. Instead, it suggests forms of black living and practice that exist as what Christina Sharpe might call "wake work," that is, the ongoing labor of living in the afterlife of slavery without becoming (and unable to become) fully captured by its terms.[35]

Further, the unspecified temporal expansion that links "this time," "future generation," and "be transformed" might fruitfully be thought of as the transhistorical engendering of histories of those contingently designated persons or groups figured as the catachreses of blackness, that is, figures of "nothing." This engendering is not the reproduction of identity or lineage in any stable sense, but a way of making sense, as we must, of those called black without enclosing them within the ontologizing gestures this article refuses. The ancestor does not appear in the normative visual-political field–cannot be seen, recognized, or interpolated as subject–yet remains a force that structures black living and the temporality of protest. We might glimpse, then, and only glimpse, as it is always refracted by an order of sense which overdetermines it in the final instance, how

we might imagine the crisis of kinship and identity that the afterlife of slavery makes into a properly political problem (of legitimacy, solidarity, and justice) approached not as a deficit or lack, but as the hint of a radically different orientation to who we are to one another, and what we might ethically owe.

Yet even as I write this, I am aware that theorizing this call-and-response practice risks reproducing the very cut I seek to expose. The horizon—the hint of a radically different orientation—recedes just as I reach for it in thought. That reach becomes another self-reflexive attempt to draw a boundary of blackness within which I might feel at home, related, ethical. This dehiscence haunts every effort to bring the end of the world into ethical meaning: a refusal of full disorientation, a tepid agnosticism. I begin to wonder if this split is not also my mandate.

Notes

1. I want to be clear that in distinguishing between protest and riot, I am not valorizing the riot as a more authentic or truthful form of political action. To do so would risk repeating the logic of authenticity I critique. Instead, my argument is that the riot unsettles authenticity as a category altogether: it disorients rather than confirms political recognition, undoing the possibility of recuperation within a hierarchy of more or less legitimate forms of protest. ↩

2. Loretta Baldassar et al., "ICT-Based Co-Presence in Transnational Families and Communities: Challenging the Premise of Face-to-Face Proximity in Sustaining Relationships," *Global Networks* 16 (April 2016): 134. ↩

3. Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Harvard University Press, 2015); also see Christopher Paul Harris, *To Build a Black Future: The Radical Politics of Joy, Pain, and Care* (Princeton University Press, 2023) for a similarly framed exploration. ↩

4. Allissa V. Richardson, *Bearing Witness While Black: African Americans, Smartphones, and the New Protest #Journalism* (Oxford University Press, 2020). ↩

5. Alicia Garza, "A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement," *The Feminist Wire*, October 7, 2014, accessed July 20, 2025, http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/ < http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/> . ↩

6. "Who we are," *Asians 4 Black Lives*, accessed July 20, 2025, https://a4bl.wordpress.com/who-we-are/ < https://a4bl.wordpress.com/who-we-are/> .

7. This formulation recalls the Combahee River Collective's declaration that "If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression" (A Black Feminist Statement, 1977). In the present moment, with various degrees of awareness of this lineage, similar axioms circulate widely voiced not only by radical Black feminist organizers but also across multiracial activist coalitions, NGOs, and social media. As the following discussion suggests, in the context of Black Lives Matter, the uptake of this "freedom for all through Black liberation" logic has been powerfully mediated by the visibility of Black death, such that solidarity and legibility alike are often bound to the spectacle of loss and death. While not a repudiation of the CRC's formulation, this contemporary dynamic raises questions about the conditions under which Black political centrality is recognized and the costs of that recognition.

8. Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Appearance of Black Lives Matter* (NAME Publications, 2017), 96.

9. Nicholas Mirzoeff, "Tactics of Appearance for Abolition Democracy #BlackLivesMatter," *Critical Inquiry*, 2017, https://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/tactics_of_appearance < https://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/tactics_of_appearance/> .

10. Mirzoeff, "Tactics," 18.

11. G. Siniscalchi, "Spectatorial Democracy," in *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Constitutionalism*, ed. J. Cremades, C. Hermida (Springer, Cham, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-31739-7_171-1 < https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-31739-7_171-1> .

12. Siniscalchi, "Spectatorial Democracy," 1.

13. Siniscalchi, "Spectatorial Democracy," 1.

14. Here I am in conversation with Rizvana Bradley's similar engagement with this idea. See Rizvana Bradley, *Anteaesthetics: Black Aesthesis and the Critique of Form* (Stanford University Press, 2023).

15. Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (University of Minnesota Press, February 22, 2007).

16. Mirzeoff, *Appearance*, 20.

17. Erin R. Pineda, *Seeing Like an Activist: Civil Disobedience and the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 7.

18. Here, I borrow the notion of a "sense of social harmony" from Bradley's deployment of it as the "collective political unconscious."

19. Pineda, *Seeing Like an Activist*, 17.

20. Huey Copeland, in *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America* (University of Chicago Press, 2013) borrows the book's title from a quote by Cedric Robinson in *Black Marxism*. Aligning himself as a scholar of the black radical tradition, in a Robinsonian sense, he writes, "in their projects, {scholars of the BRT} position blackness as a discursive site that is both 'bound to violence' {...} and 'bound to appear' within Western culture, whether in the form of a racist figurine or, more tellingly, an avant-garde tour de force" (11–12). I invoke his meaning here and expand it slightly to consider the ways in which blackness's mandate to appear is also, always, and already contained by and through that mandate. ↩

21. Here I am quoting a protestor who appeared in the livestream of the George Floyd Uprisings from independent media organization Unicorn Riot's multi-day recording. Unicorn Riot, "George Floyd Uprising in Minneapolis–Saint Paul: The First Two Weeks," June 12, 2020, https://unicornriot.ninja/2020/george-floyd-uprising-in-minneapolis-saint-paul-the-first-two-weeks/ < https://unicornriot.ninja/2020/george-floyd-uprising-in-minneapolis-saint-paul-the-first-two-weeks/> , accessed June 6, 2024, timestamp: 2:45:00–2:50:00. ↩

22. Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot: The New Era of Uprisings* (Verso, 2016). ↩

23. Clover, *Riot*, 168. ↩

24. Ricky Mouser, "How To Read A Riot," *Journal of Ethics & Social Philosophy* 26, no. 3 (2024): 445+, < http://dx.doi.org.libproxy.berkeley.edu/10.26556/jesp.v26i3.2316> https://doi.org/10.26556/jesp.v26i3.2316 < https://doi.org/10.26556/jesp.v26i3.2316> . ↩

25. Mouser, "How To Read A Riot," 464–465. ↩

26. On blackness as nothingness, see especially Calvin Warren's *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation.* ↩

27. Jared Sexton, "Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word," *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge* 29 (2016): 3, https://doi.org/10.20415/rhiz /029.e02. ↩

28. While my use of *ab-sens* draws on Lee Edelman's psychoanalytic account of the absenting of meaning from being, it should not be read as a substitution for, or dilution of afropessimist analyses of *non-sense* of black ontology. I mobilize *ab-sens* as a concept for thinking about the crisis of intelligibility and sense that structures regimes of appearance rather than as a total theory of black being. In this respect, *ab-sens* names a formal antagonism to legibility that intersects with, but does not exhaust afropessimist claims concerning blackness and being, but demonstrates how black protest can precipitate a breakdown of sense that exposes the limits of political and aesthetic recuperation.See *Bad Education: Why Queer Theory Teaches Us Nothing* (Duke University Press, 2022), 4. ↩

29. On expenditure without reserve see David Marriott, "On Decadence: Bling Bling," *e-flux Journal* 79 (February 2017), or more broadly, Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (Zone Books, 1991). ↩

30. Here I am drawing on the psychoanalytic concept of the cut, particularly as developed in Lacanian theory, where it refers to the fundamental rupture that inaugurates subjectivity. The cut marks the moment the subject is separated from the Real by entry into language (the Symbolic), establishing both lack and desire. See Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (MIT Press, February 2006). ↩

31. Edelman, *Bad Education*, 29. ↩

32. Frank B. Wilderson III, "Blacks and the Master/Slave Relation," in *Afro-Pessimism: An Introduction*, ed. Frank B. Wilderson III (Racked & Dispatched, 2017), 15–30. ↩

33. Žižek's psychoanalytic explication of the cut re-situates our understanding of it with attention to the drive, rather than desire. He writes: "That is to say: the weird movement called "drive" is not driven by the "impossible" quest for the lost object; it is a push to enact "loss"—the gap, cut, distance— itself directly." Consequently, my usage of "the cut" here does not refer to it as a proxy for the retrieval of a lost object, what might inhere in the desire for the legitimacy of black political action, for example. Rather, I invoke it to highlight how at the level of theory, interpretation, or reading, the analytic maneuver that lacerates and excises the non-productive and anti-social dimensions of black riots to retrieve its political and ethical legitimacy, repeat this constitutive cut in ways that draw attention to how the repetitious disciplining of the surplus of black riot becomes an ontic mode of enjoyment. See Žižek, *Parallax View*, 62. ↩

34. Here I am thinking alongside David Marriott's idea that "Blackness would then be defined as a kind of primitive drive or energy thoroughly stripped of morality and restraint; containing within itself nothing but a drive that ceaselessly expends itself without any thought of limit or reserve." David Marriott, *Whither Fanon? Studies in the Blackness of Being* (Stanford University Press, 2018), 125. ↩

35. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016). ↩

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